THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Waiting

November 30, 1997
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Advent is a time of waiting. Our whole life, however, is Advent – that is, a time of waiting for the ultimate, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when all people are brothers and sisters and one rejoices in the words of the angels: "On earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests." Learn to wait, because he has promised to come.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
An Advent Sermon

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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WAITING
or
WHY WE DON'T SING CAROLS IN ADVENT

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 1:26-38

"For you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long." Psalm 25:5

I had just given the bulletin a final look before it went to the printer for the first Sunday in Advent. I confirmed the prayers, responses, hymns. The first hymn for the first Sunday in Advent, as it has been here for years, is "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," a big, heavy, slow, ponderous, sonorous, hymn with a melody that goes back to the chants of the fourth century. The fourth century! That's the 300s, 1700 years ago. It's the kind of hymn that makes folks crazy, not only the ones who want to sing Christmas carols in church during Advent, but also the folks who want us to be relevant and by relevance mean singing songs that sound like a Hallmark TV commercial or MTV. "Let All Mortal Flesh" is a real hymn. It has deep, rich chords holding it up that remind us that the story we are about to retell and the event we are about to celebrate did not happen last week: relevant in every age, you bet. But, like that hymn, it is held up by history. It is a story of waiting and waiting and waiting, extending thousands of years before the event and after the event, and waiting now for its completion, its consummation.

> "Let all mortal flesh keep silence
> And with fear and trembling stand;
> Ponder nothing earthly minded,
> For with blessing in His hand,
> Christ our God to earth descendeth,
> Our full homage to demand."

I particularly like that ancient admonition, "Ponder nothing earthly minded." What an extraordinary thing to say or sing, here in the midst of the busiest, biggest, most commercially profitable concentration of retail merchandising and marketing anywhere in the world, where it is virtually impossible not to ponder and be captivated by everything earthly minded!

Well, I gave the bulletin a final check and walked home in the dusk of early evening with all the wonderful white lights glistening, humming, "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." To negotiate Michigan Avenue these days, at that hour, requires, as you know, such monumental patience that your progress is a little like cold molasses, or you can opt for the broken-field running skills with which Barry Sanders devastated our Bears on Thursday: dodging, feinting left, right, making a move, accelerating, high stepping off the curb into the street. I chose the latter option, of course.

"Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." How to do that, what with *Streetwise* salesmen, the saxophonist, buses, cabs, cars lined up onto the Drive, impatiently honking?

I arrived home to pick up a two-day accumulation of mail. I opened my mailbox. Do not go away for one day during Advent. Do not allow your mail to accumulate for 48 hours. My box virtually exploded onto the floor in front of me. I was so taken with it all – this abundance – that I went upstairs and organized it and counted 32 catalogs. Still humming "Ponder Nothing Earthly Minded," I catalogued the catalogs, including:

- Gold Standard and Chalet Wine Shop Holiday sale
- Gift ideas from Ameritech (two identical catalogs)
- In the Company of Dogs – toys and gifts for your dog, a doggie couch, pins, dog angels for your tree, dog art and for Christmas dinner, a doggie Harvest Table with double 8 oz. stainless steel bowls 11" off the floor for better digestion
- Southern Poverty Law Center
- Marshall Field's
- Spillsburg Puzzle Company
- Anti-Cruelty Society return address stickers
- American Express, American Express, American Express, five separate ads, including a 52-pager
- Judy Erwin wants my vote: so does John Cullerton
- FAO Schwartz – the winner in the heft and weight class: 84 full pages

"Ponder Nothing Earthly Minded?"

At Advent, the dissonance between Christian faith and the culture around us is so sharp it is sometimes painful. The culture and the economy is in the beginning states of the frenzy, a wonderful frenzy to be sure, but here we are singing about "Mortal Flesh Keeping Silence and Pondering Nothing Earthly Minded." Out there the lights are up in gorgeous colors: red, green, gold, silver. In here we get out the color purple, just like Lent. Out there it's "Joy to the World, the Lord has Come!" and in here, it's "O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here..."

Why, every minister is asked, often with exasperation, don't we sing the carols – like everybody else? Why are they singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem" at Lord and Taylor and in the church we're singing about lonely exile? The answer is that it isn't Christmas yet, admittedly a minor technicality here on this corner. It's Advent and the idea and theme of Advent is waiting, hoping, leaning forward in anticipation. The theme of Advent is that the date to remember what happened 2,000 years ago isn't here yet. You may tantalize your child by promising that "your birthday is coming." You do not, in fact, sing, "Happy Birthday to You" every day for a month ahead of time. But even more important, Christians know that the event itself, the birth of Jesus, is always in a sense not yet complete. God's coming into history is here, but not yet here. It is an event but also a future promise. And so it has been the cumulative experience and wisdom of the Christian church for nearly 2,000 years that those are important human experiences and that the full, magnificent goodness of the child's birth in Bethlehem is affirmed and joyfully enhanced if somehow we can experience together something of that waiting, anticipating and hoping.

So that's why we don't sing carols in Advent, although I'm as impatient as anyone and we will figure out a way to slip a few in, and of course you and I will listen to them at home and hear them whether we want to or not as we live and shop through these wonderful days before Christmas. In worship we will try to remember and to recreate a very important part of the Christian story and, as a matter of fact, an important part of your story and mine – namely, waiting.

The story begins with the waiting. The way Luke tells the story, a lot of people have been waiting for the Messiah, waiting for God to do something. I love the idea that the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke were added by the writer after the book was completed, essentially because the main character of those two chapters, Mary, mother of Jesus, put her foot down and insisted. Some scholars believe that the first draft of the Gospel of Luke began with what is now Chapter 3. It feels like the opening words of the book. Those scholars say that it looks like Luke or someone added the accounts of the birth later: our favorite account by the way, angels and shepherds coming to the manger and the first chapter with its wonderful cast of characters: old Zechariah and Elizabeth, who conceives in old age, the news of which leaves Zechariah speechless for the nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy, a pregnancy which will result in the birth of John the Baptist; the annunciation, and the tender meeting between young Mary and her older relative, Elizabeth, and Mary's glorious Magnificat. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices on God, my savior."

I'm no New Testament scholar, but my private theory is that Mary read the first draft which begins the story of her son when he was 30. She was quite old by that time; it was around 60 or 70 A.D. when Luke wrote his account. Mary was maybe the only person still alive who could remember how it all began. And I think she read the draft which begins when her son is 30, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius," and she finds Luke the author and says something like, "You know, this actually begins 30 years earlier. It begins quietly and mysteriously when all of a sudden, unexpectedly, my old cousin Elizabeth became pregnant, long after that happened to women, and then I – I too, not yet married, still a girl, I too was pregnant. And I went to see her – it was the sixth month for her – we both said we had a premonition, a vision, like an angel of God ..." And so Luke wrote it all down and included it.

The actual beginning of the story is the waiting, the anticipating, the hoping. It's always a little risky for men to talk about pregnancy for obvious reasons. But I'm going to risk it. Advent is about pregnancy.... The world is pregnant with God. There is a sense in which you and I are pregnant, and the essence of it is not only potentiality and possibility and high hopefulness – for the world and for ourselves, but also foremost, the waiting. You cannot hurry it along. You can, I am told on good authority, simply wait. And sometimes it is uncomfortable and painful. And sometimes you are utterly impatient. And always it is about waiting in hope.

Someone said that waiting for the Lord is the major theme of Hebrew scriptures.

- Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame – for you I wait all day long. (Psalm 25:3,5)
- Wait for the Lord. (Psalm 27:14)

- Wait for the Lord. (Psalm 37:34)
- I will wait for the Lord. (Psalm 130:5)
- Wait continually for your God. (Hosea 12:6)
- Wait for the God of Salvation. (Micah 7:7)
- Wait for me, says the Lord. (Zephaniah 3:8)

And my favorite:

- "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31)

That's a lot of waiting. Some of it is patient and hopeful, some of it is despairing, and some of it is impatient. "How long, O Lord?" the psalmist demands to know.

Some of us are better at waiting than others. Generally, we Americans are not particularly good at waiting. The late Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and theologian, wrote about us:

> "Waiting is not a very popular attitude. Waiting is not something people think about with great sympathy. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time. Perhaps that is because the culture we live in is saying, 'Get going. Do something! Don't just sit there and wait!' For many people, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to be. [*Weavings*, Jan/Feb 1987, "A Spirituality of Waiting"]

I can identify with that. I don't like to wait for anything. I was brought up in a railroader's household where time and schedules were the axis around which life revolved. When my father said we were leaving at 8:00, it meant 7:45. He was ready at 7:30, starting to pace impatiently. Waiting for him meant sitting outside with the car running, ultimately unable not to blow the horn to hurry us along. I've never matched those standards, but I do not like to wait – and I am not alone. A flight delay and waiting at O'Hare, an unanticipated traffic jam on the Kennedy , a doctor's appointment scheduled for 1:00 p.m. which actually happens at 3:00 p.m. after a two-hour wait, are major traumas in the lives of many of us.

We are not very good at it because our culture not only doesn't acknowledge or reward it, but celebrates instantaneous results or gratification. The *New York Times* reports that Americans are impatient with diplomacy and favor military action against Iraq, but also want our troops to come home from Bosnia instead of staying the course for the long-term and patient work of peace-making.

We are not particularly good at long-term investing. We want results, not this year, but this quarter. *Wait Till Next Year*, the title of a wonderful book by Doris Kearns Goodwin about growing up in the 50s, in love with the Brooklyn Dodgers, who did, in fact, win a pennant and a World Series – has a different ring to it in a city where rebuilding and therefore waiting goes on for decades – closing in on a century.

We are not very good at it, and yet it is one of the most human of all experiences. Children wait, not very patiently, to grow up, to go to school, to go to high school. We wait to be able to drive, to date, to be free of parental supervision. We wait to go to college, to be 21, to graduate. We wait for a job, romance, marriage, children, success. We wait, all our lives for meaning and happiness and success, for ecstasy, love, passion, for joy, fulfillment, contentment, salvation.

We are waiting for love to come and make some sense of our lives. We are waiting, the Scriptures know, for Jesus.

Nouwen tells about being called to the bedside of a friend who was very sick and was not going to get better. His friend was vital, active – lived a useful and productive life. When Nouwen visited him in the hospital, he said:

> "Henri, here I am lying in this bed, and I don't even know how to think of myself as being sick. My whole way of thinking about myself is in terms of action, in terms of doing things for people. And here I am passive, and I can't do anything any more. Help me."

Nouwen reflected:

> "Somehow this man had learned to think about himself as a man who was worth what he was doing. And so when he got sick, his hope seemed to rest on the hope that he might get better and return to what he had been doing. It wasn't going to happen. He was going to get worse. What did I have to say to him?"

Nouwen helped his friend see his experience in terms of Jesus' own waiting: Jesus' letting go of wishes and fears and anxieties and waiting in hope for God's purposes to work out. Slowly his friend could let go of his impatience and desperate anxiety to be able to do things and to rest in hope.

The waiting in the first chapter of Luke, Mary's waiting, and before that, in Hebrew scriptures, is not simply sitting passively in the absence of anything happening. It is waiting in hope – waiting on the basis of a promise. Waiting expectantly. Waiting because gestation has happened. It is the unique waiting of a pregnancy. Necessary waiting – waiting that cannot be hurried. Waiting without which there is no creativity, no new life.

I suspect that those images are heavy with meaning regardless of who you are. It is not easy for us, but I suspect that there is not a one of us who is not, in some way, waiting for something, impatiently waiting for something to happen – a new job, a new opportunity, a new relationship, a new baby, a new chapter in our lives, a new cure for our illness, a new burst of energy, a new breath of life – I suspect that there is not one of us who does not need to learn the fundamental lesson of waiting in patience and hope, expectant waiting that does not push or rush, but leans hopefully into the future and allows gestation to happen: allows God to work.

That's what Advent is about. The world is pregnant with God. A seed has been planted. It is germinating. We still wait. The world is not yet at peace. Swords have not yet been beaten into pruning hooks and spears into plows. Nations have not yet given up taking arms and spending precious resources for weapons of destruction. There is still injustice and suffering. Septuplets are welcomed by an entire town and nation, and celebrated as a gift of God, and on that very day, an equal number of equally innocent children is abandoned in a filthy south side apartment. But the essence of Advent is to know that a seed has been planted and its gestation is sometimes expressed in the fact that we cannot bear nor tolerate the tragedy of those children because we know about God's love and God's son and God's kingdom. Advent means that the world is pregnant with God and God's love and God's justice and God's ultimate victory over all that denies or destroys life.

Last Monday morning there was a memorial service in this sanctuary, a reminder to me always around this time of year that what we are about in Advent is so much larger and deeper and more profound than what is happening around us, as enchanting as it is. A reminder always that what we are about as we sing Advent hymns is a promise which addresses the human situation, our situation, at its most basic and fundamental level. A man died 15-20 years before he should have, a vigorous, happy, productive husband, father, son, friend. A community gathered, as we always do, to celebrate a good and well-lived life, and to hear again the promise, to wait for the Lord.

And among the words we heard were the blessed promise:

> "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

And you and I? A professor of theology, Wendy Wright, uses pregnancy, waiting for birth, to experience and to discuss God's Advent, God's coming into creation, God's birth in the world:

> "Pregnancy," she writes, "is at the core of the Christian message. We are pregnant. We are the place of waiting." [*Weavings*, op.cit., p. 27]

And so, let us not sing the carols quite yet. Let us wait – in hope and expectation. And let us join voices with one another and with the church back through the ages.

> "Savior of the nations come,
> Virgin's Son, make here Your home.
> Marvel now, O heaven and earth,
> That the Lord chose such a birth."

Amen.